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AUTHOR Eby, Lillian T.; Buch, Kimberly
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ABSTRACT

Corporate restructuring has resulted in involuntary job loss for a significant number of white collar workers. This study investigated gender differences in reaction to involuntary job loss and tested a model of career gorwth through job loss. Former clients, 456 males and 62 females, of a nationwide outplacement firm completed a questionnaire that measured the two criteria that were chosen to operationalize the construct of career growth (new job satisfaction and a retrospective perception of the benefits of job loss as outweighing the costs) and seven predictor variables (pre-job loss satisfaction, post-job loss activity level, long-term financial impact, level of post-job loss family support, degree of family flexibility, level of post-job loss friend/coworker support, and current emotional level). Data were subjected to t-tests, chi-squares, and separate stepwise regression procedures. The results supported and extended the Latack Dozier model of career growth through job loss. The overwhelming response to job loss was career growth for both sexes. Significant gender differences were found on several variables: salary prior to job loss, salary at the current job, age, overall quality of work life at the new job, new job satisfaction, post-job loss family support, and post-job loss friend/coworker support. (Author/NB)

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Gender Differences in Coping with Involuntary White Collar Job Loss

Lillian T. Eby and Kimberly Buch

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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Abstract

This research investigated gender differences in reaction to involuntary job loss and tested a model of career growth through job loss (Latack & Dozier, 1986). The construct of career growth was operationalized by the following: new job satisfaction and a retrospective perception of the benefits of job loss as outweighing the costs. Contextual factors present in the job transition were predictor variables in the study: pre-job loss satisfaction, post-job loss activity level, long term financial impact, level of post-job loss family support, degree of family flexibility, level of post-job loss friend/co-worker support, and current emotional level. The sample consisted of 518 former clients of a nationwide outplacement firm (456 males and 62 females). A questionnaire measured the two criteria and the seven predictor variables. The data were subject to t-tests, chi squares, and separate stepwise regression procedures. Results supported and extended the Latack Dozier model. The overwhelming response to job loss was career growth for both sexes. Significant gender differences were found on the following variables: salary prior to job loss, salary at the current job, age, overall quality of work life at the new job, new job satisfaction, post-job loss family support and post-job loss friend/co-worker support.

Problem

The rungs in the corporate ladder are breaking under the weight of changing economic conditions, global competition, declining white collar productivity and the movement from manufacturing to service oriented industries. One response: corporate restructuring and involuntary white collar job loss. It is predicted that two of every four executives will experience involuntary job loss in the next eight years (Burdett, 1988). Over eighty-five percent of the Fortune 1000 companies reported downsizing in the years 1987-1991. This translates to over five million involuntarily displaced white collar workers. During 1990, over half of these jobs were lost (Cameron, Freeman & Mirshra, 1991).

White collar job loss, once primarily a "male" issue, has bridged the gender gap and become a major trade off for success in the corporate arena for all players. Women's participation in managerial, administrative and executive jobs rose from twenty percent to thirty-five percent between the years 1972 and 1985 (Bergman, 1986), and is steadily climbing. The downside of this progress is that women usually have less tenure, and decisions of whom to terminate are often based on this criterion. Clearly, women in management positions must face the very real possibility of

involuntary job loss. Based on its pervasiveness, downsizing is not only a management prerogative but a serious social concern.

The victims of downsizing experience various reactions to job loss. Job loss yields physical, psychological and social effects. It can create almost as much stress as the death of a loved one and is more stressful than divorce (Kaufman, 1982). At the individual level, job loss is related to lowered self-esteem, self-blame, shame, and depression (Fineman, 1983; Kaufman, 1982; Mirowsky & Ross, 1986). Similarly, unemployment is associated with increased mental health problems and substance abuse (Cramer & Keitel, 1984; Kaufman, 1982). At the societal level, it is related to disruptions in the family structure manifested in child abuse and marital discord (Cramer & Keitel, 1984).

For many individuals, however, job loss is translated into a positive growth experience and opportunity for personal fulfillment through the redirection of one's life focus and goals, the consideration of new alternatives, and the chance to develop new competencies (Hartley, 1980; Latack & Dozier, 1986; Leana & Ivancevich, 1987; Little, 1976). The Latack Dozier model of career growth through job loss defines this "career growth" in two ways. Career growth involves the movement to another job which provides new opportunities for psychological success as well as a retrospective perception of the benefits of the job loss as outweighing the costs. Latack and Dozier propose the following moderator variables in the stress reaction to job loss which are

integral in determining who experiences career growth: post-job loss activity level, pre-job loss satisfaction, career stage, financial impact, social support, family flexibility, resolution of grief and anger, and a professional termination (i.e., advance warning, explanation for termination provided, termination by one's immediate boss).

Empirical support for the moderating effects of many of these variables abound in the literature. A high post-job loss activity level has been repeatedly shown to decrease the distress of job loss for the unemployed professional (Biak, Hosseini & Priesmeyer, 1989; Swineburne, 1981) and has been isolated as the single best predictor of general mental health (Hepworth, 1980). Family, friend and co-worker support are also very important in moderating the stress of unemployment (Gore, 1978; Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980).

Gender differences have important implications for the reaction and subsequent adaptation to involuntary job loss. A meta analysis of distress reactions and vulnerability to stress show that although women are more vulnerable to stress than men, they report no more actual distress than men to major life events (Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985). In an extensive review of the literature, Vaux (1985) found that women have larger support networks, receive more emotional support and perceive support as more readily available than men. Further, gender differences in support emerge more during stressful experiences (i.e., job loss) than at other times. These between-group differences suggest that the prediction

of career growth, reaction to involuntary job loss, and acceptance of the situation are affected by inherent gender differences.

The purpose of this research was to test the Latack Dozier model of career growth through job loss. In addition, differences between professional males and females in terms of reactions to involuntary job loss were examined.

Method

Questionnaires were mailed to 2530 former clients of a nationwide outplacement firm throughout the United States; 520 were not deliverable by the post office, yielding a sample size of 777 and an overall response rate of 39%. Of the 770 respondents, 518 reported their gender; 456 male and 62 female. Thus, the percentage of female respondents was 10.4%. Only subjects indicating their sex were used in the subsequent analysis (N=518).

The questionnaire was designed to measure the following contextual variables in the Latack Dozier model: 1) pre-job loss satisfaction, 2) post-job loss activity level, 3) long term financial impact, 4) level of post-job loss family support, 5) level of post-job loss friend and co-worker support, 6) degree of family flexibility, and 7) current emotional level regarding the job loss.

These seven factors were the predictor variables in the study. The criterion of career growth was measured by two items: satisfaction with the new job and a retrospective perception of the benefits of job loss as outweighing the costs. These two dependent variables were averaged to determine an overall measure of career growth (AVGC1). The data were subjected to separate stepwise regression procedures for males and females. The questionnaire also included several demographic variables and a comparison of the old job and current job in terms of several objective and subjective

measures. Frequencies and means were tabulated on these variables, and comparisons were made using t-test and chi square analyses.

Results

Career growth was the overwhelming response to job loss as indexed by the AVGC1 score, 81% of the women and 87% of the men reported this outcome. Significant differences were found between men and women on the following: annual salary prior to job loss, annual salary at the new job, age, overall quality of worklife at the new job, new job satisfaction, post-job loss family support and post-job loss friend/co-worker support. These data are presented in Tables 1-3.

In terms of compensation, men were significantly higher paid in their old jobs, $x^2(4, N = 510) = 42.55$, $p<.001$, (see Table 1) and significantly ($p<.01$) higher paid in their new jobs (see Table 2) compared to women. Table 3 indicates differences in the type of social support following job loss. Friend and co-worker support are significantly ($p<.001$) higher for women, whereas family support is higher for men ($p<.05$). Overall quality of work life in the new job was significantly ($p<.05$) higher for men as was new job satisfaction ($p<.05$).

The reason for job loss was analyzed by the questions: "What was your previous employer's stated reason for your separation from your position?" and "What do you feel to be the reason for your separation from your position?". Significant gender differences were found in the perceived reason for job loss, $x^2(1, N = 516) =$

16.21, $p<.01$. Forty-seven percent (47%) of the men reported merger/acquisition or downsizing as the perceived "real" reason they were terminated whereas 72% of the women reported this perception. Fewer women reported personal chemistry (18%) or "other" (10%) as the perceived reason, while a substantially higher percentage of men reported personal chemistry (34%) or "other" (17%) as the employer's motive. Very few subjects of either sex reported job performance as the perceived reason for job loss (1% of the men and none of the women). Fifty-one percent (51%) of the men, compared to thirty-four percent (34%) of the women reported a discrepancy between the employer's stated reason and their perceived reason for the job loss, $x^2(1, N = 515) = 6.40$, $p<.01$.

As hypothesized, several of the variables in the Latack Dozier model were predictive of career growth, and also as predicted, gender differences were evident. Tables 4-5 show the simple correlations between the predictor and criterion variables for males and females. Tables 6-7 report the results of the stepwise multiple regression procedure separately for males and females. For men, financial impact, friend/co-worker support, activity level and pre-job loss satisfaction are the best predictors of career growth. Model variables predictive for females include family flexibility, financial impact, and pre-job loss satisfaction.

Interpretation/Discussion

The most promising finding is that job loss is frequently translated into a positive growth opportunity for both sexes. Upon close examination of the data, a complex profile emerged which differentiates males and females on the following dimensions: characteristics of the old and new job, factors which promote this positive outcome, and coping strategies employed.

Based on the finding of disparate annual salaries between males and females, it is somewhat surprising that men re[illegible] serious negative financial impact due to job loss. This may be due to the socialization of men as the "bread winner", suggesting that the male sense of identity and security are more closely tied to work and financial success (Bartell & Bartell, 1985; Fineman, 1983). Indeed, women are able to handle financial difficulties better than men (Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985), and may have lower expectations for financial success based on women's history in the work force. Similarly, overall quality of work life in the new job is rated lower by females. Coupled with lower new job satisfaction and pay, the consequences of involuntary job loss appear greater for women than men.

It is important to bear in mind that overall, women and men did not differ in their perception of the job loss as a positive change. Although women took a decrease in pay, acquired a new job

which yielded lower job satisfaction and quality of work life, they were still able to view the job transition as a positive growth opportunity. This finding implies that differing societal attitudes and socialization experiences between the sexes may lead to differing conceptualization of success and career expectations.

Based on past research it has been found that men have higher expectations and confidence in task success, are more competitive in achievement situations (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1978), and perceive more control over their environment than women (Deux, 1979; Wiley & Eskilson, 1983). Women are also less motivated by power and money and more motivated by a sense of mastery (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1978; Mirowsky & Ross, 1986).

Gender differences in reported life satisfaction shed light on the finding as well. Wood, Rhodes and Whelan (1989) reviewed the literature and found that women report greater overall happiness and life satisfaction than men. Furthermore, Tait, Padgett and Baldwin (1989) found a strong positive correlation (r=.44, p<.01) between job and life satisfaction for both sexes. In light of this relationship, the results of this research are less surprising; perhaps women experience career growth due to a higher degree of life satisfaction in lieu of the contextual factors present in the new job.

The coping process itself differed for males and females as well. Males reported significantly higher scores on family support and women reported higher scores on friend/co-worker support. These

differences in social support confirm previous research findings that men resort to formal intimate relationships for support whereas women report more emotional and social support from friends (Vaux, 1985). It is noteworthy that mean values on the above mentioned variables are very high (see Table 3), attesting to the essentialness of support in the job loss process for both sexes.

A final gender difference in the coping process is important. Women were significantly more likely to report congruence in the employer's stated reason for the job loss and their perception of the real reason. More men than women sought an alternative explanation for the job loss other than corporate restructuring. Several possible explanations exist. Men may utilize more active cognitive coping strategies and resort to depersonalization as an ego protection (Bogo, Winget & Glesser, 1970; Defares, Brandjes, Nass, & van der Ploeg, 1984; Eagley & Whitehead, 1972; Rim, 1990). In white collar America, perhaps men seek other explanations to rationalize the fact they are expendable. Also, due to the fact the men were significantly older, and probably had more tenure, this coping mechanism may have helped them deal with the devastation of the job loss after many years of faithful service.

This research supports and extends the Latack Dozier model of career growth through job loss. It highlights important and significant gender differences in coping strategies utilized and reactions to job loss. The myth that women are more vulnerable and cannot emotionally handle unemployment as adequately as men is

seriously questioned (see Table 8). In fact, women are able to turn this potentially devastating life event into a positive growth opportunity without many factors present in the transition for a males (i.e., comparable pay, status, benefits).

As the trend in corporate restructuring continues and becomes legitimatized as a widely-used management prerogative, unprecedented numbers of employees will be facing the hard fact of unemployment, and with that, more and more women will join the ranks of the white collar unemployed. Identification of factors in the job loss transition which pave the way to positive consequences for these displaced employees is critical. Gender differences in the job transition process are especially important in light of the dearth of research on the topic of female white collar job loss. Overall the implications for researchers, outplacement practitioners, corporate decision makers, and the individual employee can not be overstated.

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Table 1

Annual Salary Prior to Job Loss by Gender

	Males[a]		Females[b]	
	f	%	f	%
Under $50,000	70	15.6	27	44.3
$50,000-75,000	178	39.6	29	47.5
$75,000-100,000	121	26.9	5	5.2
$100,000-150,000	73	16.3	0	
Over $150,000	7	1.6	0	

[a] n = 449. [b] n =61.

$x^2_{14} = 47.55$ $p = .000$

Table 2

Characteristics of the New Job by Gender

	Males		Females		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
Salary [a]	3.94	1.97	3.18	2.19	2.74***
Status[a]	4.13	2.02	3.93	1.96	0.73
Benefits[a]	3.32	1.79	3.12	1.99	0.81
Geographic Locale[a]	4.19	1.66	4.05	1.85	0.61
Overall quality of of worklife[a]	4.84	1.77	4.23	2.09	2.43*
New job satisfaction (C1) 1=not satisfying 7=very satisfying	5.30	1.42	4.85	1.81	2.20*
Retrospective view of job loss (C2) 1=worst occurance ever 7=positive opportunity	5.11	1.54	5.00	1.68	0.51
AVGC1 (C1 + C2 / 2)	5.22	1.30	4.93	1.46	1.60

[a] 1 = old job was much better
4 = both jobs comparable
7 = new job much better

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 3

Gender Differences in the Job Loss Transition

	Males		Females		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
Prior job satisfaction 1=dissatisfying 7=satisfying	4.65	1.60	4.77	1.74	-0.41
Post-job loss activity level 1=inactive/nonproductive 7=very active/productive	5.15	1.47	5.02	1.57	0.06
Long term financial impact 1=significant negative 7=significant positive	3.86	1.47	3.45	1.71	1.74
Family support 1=not supportive 7=very supportive	6.22	1.16	5.87	1.54	2.09*
Family flexibility 1=not flexible 7=very flexible	5.70	1.29	5.62	1.55	0.32
Friend/co-worker support 1=not supportive 7=very supportive	5.51	1.44	6.18	1.08	-4.39***
Age	47.6	7.04	43.67	7.20	4.06***
Months of Unemployment	6.02	4.64	6.04	4.71	-0.03

*P < .05. **P < .01. ***P < .001.

Table 4

Correlations Between Criterion and Predictor Variables for Females

	New job satisfaction	Retrospective perception of the job loss	AVGC1[a]
Age	-.08	-.22	-.18
Pre-job loss satisfaction	-.05	-.20	-.14
Activity level	.14	.05	.11
Financial impact	.22	.47***	.41***
Family support	.27	.37**	.38**
Family flexibility	.32*	.43***	.44***
Friend/co-worker support	-.07	-.11	-.11
Emotional level	.06	.27*	.19
Professional termination	.01	.10	.06

[a]arithmatic mean of the scores on the index of new job satisfaction and retrospective perception of the job loss.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 5

Correlations Between Criterion and Predictor Variables for Males

	New job satisfaction	Retrospective perception of the job loss	AVGC1[a]
Age	.00	-.11*	-.06
Pre-job loss satisfaction	-.08	-.24***	-.19***
Activity level	.23***	.30***	.30***
Financial impact	.26***	.43***	.39***
Family support	.10*	.13**	.14**
Family flexibility	.16***	.17***	.19***
Friend/co-worker support	.17***	.28***	.26***
Emotional level	.05	.13**	.10*
Professional termination	.05	.10*	.09

[a]arithmatic mean of the scores on the index of new job satisfaction and retrospective perception of the job loss.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 6

Summary of the Forward Stepwise Multiple Regression for Females

Step	Variable entered	R^2	Increment
1	Family felxibility	.2009***	
2	Financial impact	.3127**	.1117
3	Pre job loss satisfaction	.3670*	.0544

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 7

Summary of the Forward Stepwise Multiple Regression for for Males

Step	Variable entered	R^2	Increment
1	Financial impact	.1453***	
2	Friend/co-worker support	.1817***	.0364
3	Activity level	.2059***	.0242
4	Pre job loss satisfaction	.2287***	.0229

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 8

Emotional Level in Regard to Job Loss by Gender

	Males[a]		Females[b]	
	f	%	f	%
Shock	12	2.7	3	4.8
Denial	1	.2	0	
Relief	37	8.3	6	9.7
Bargaining	12	2.7	1	1.6
Depression	17	3.8	1	1.6
Acceptance	287	64.1	43	69.3

[a] $n = 336$. [b] $n = 54$.

$x^2_7 = 3.79$ (N.S.)